

Town Hall, opening (Pastor Chad)

New Song Church, March 7, 2019 | 6:30pm – 8:00pm

Whenever “larger scale” events happen in the life of a Church, it’s always a privilege to be able to stand near the work of the Holy Spirit and just take-in what’s happening in the midst of any particular circumstance. I’ve stood with you as loved ones died, as children graduated – or were born, for that matter. We’ve held hands and prayed for doctors while loved ones are in surgery; we’ve also prayed around your new home or business. I’ve had the opportunity to ‘like’ all the Christmas morning pictures I can on social media of you and yours around a tree – likewise, while you’re together for Thanksgiving, summer vacations and fireworks – I’ve enjoyed each of these opportunities so very much.

As your Pastors, Cindy Lee & I have counted each of those moments as sacred. None of them are events we’ve “had” to do, but rather, we’ve been *invited* into – and we’ve gained much from living life alongside of you: picnics, times of prayer and listening, small groups, worship, Bible studies, meals out and more.

There has also been days when I’ve stood with you in what I’d categorize as different events: no less holy, no less sacred, but not always “what they prepared us for in Seminary.” You can imagine these types of days, perhaps, as I recall just a few: for instance, when a spouse was caught with infidelity or porn addiction, when a relative was caught embezzling funds from work, when a daughter was arrested for dealing substances or another child for creating fake ID’s, or even hacking into the government & banks upon occasion... and on & on & on. These have been times of holding some to account, while at the same time, just *holding one another* in the sure & certain hope God has gone before us and will carry us to the place where we belong.

Additionally, one such instance I left out above has happened more in the last 5 years than in my first 15 in ministry combined. I have sat with multiple families in my office & their living rooms as they have shared of a loved one who has come out to them, revealing their sexuality as being something other than “straight.” During these times, I’ve had my I’s dotted and T’s crossed: it’s not the right time to waffle or do “on the job training.” What does God’s love mean in that moment, specifically? In what ways would God’s love have us to respond?

My unscientific research says that everyone “knows what they would do...” until it’s their child (or their parent, sibling, friend, or loved one). I have seen loved ones struggle in this moment: some will say they’re *fearful for the repercussions this decision may bring their relative or friend...* after all, this world isn’t always very kind. I have seen situations where words are shouted, doors slammed and chaos ensues. I have seen a fork in the road: in the case of a child revealing their sexuality to their parents, there’s the side that has said, “I accept you and love you, always.” I have also seen the polar opposite: “I loved you, but you weren’t raised this way. Until you “straighten” up, you’re not welcome in this house.”

I recognize no one likes to talk about human sexuality in these types of terms. Most often, we like to have our views affirmed; when someone says something we disagree with, we turn them off. Nonetheless, our denomination had a discussion this past week. They allowed us all to pull up a chair at the ‘family dinner table’ (via livestream) while the delegates had a discussion play out on the world stage.

United Methodists have been regarded as the ‘last of the mainline denominations’ to debate and clarify their position on the topic of human sexuality. Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Lutherans, for instance, have all traveled over this bridge before, and have continued to exist; in certain cases, some have even grown since clarifying their position, while others have shrunk or even continued to divide again.

Here at New Song, I've learned we have persons who are heterosexual, previously-divorced, and in some cases remarried, couples who participated in pre-marital sex & those who are virgins into their elder years. I have learned we have members who are LGBTQUIA+, who are in a same-gender marriage and also those who have siblings, children and even parents who are in this category. I have learned that we have some who feel this is absolutely, 100% a choice and those persons use terminology that aligns with *lifestyle*... "this homosexual lifestyle." We have those who feel it may be beyond a person's control, for instance, from their environment when growing up or at school, we have those who feel issues of non-hetero-normativism is a behavior that stems from abuse or even mental illness. We also have those who believe sexuality is determined very early in life and is the result of biological process – something no one has "choice" over, but something that is both chemical and hormonal in nature.

As to why we are here tonight, the United Methodist Church chose 3 years ago to launch the "Commission on the Way Forward." The goal in this effort was to bring together the many different sides who exist as United Methodists and see what proposals could be formulated that would lay out process, procedures and the stance of the denomination. We learned many things about our United Methodist Church in this process: 1). We are a Global Church, which carries with it many different implications for the 12,000,000+ United Methodists from around the world. 2). We are spread out along theological fault lines that range from incredibly conservative (to the far right) all the way over to very progressive (to the far left). 3). An area where we all begin that's in our Discipline and in Scripture is this: **we affirm the sacredness of every individual; that we are all created in the image of God; that we are blessed by a God who loves everyone.** And I've learned this: 4). New Song is representative of very conservative persons all the way through to very progressive: everyone is here! Not all agree!

So I want to remind persons tonight of something: when you speak, you're speaking about people who are potentially in this room on either side (to, not about). So be aware: civil decorum standards apply; though I find the topic filled with all kinds of 'energy' at times, I'm going to hold that line tonight. We talk TO one another & we treat each other with respect. (In a Christian house of worship, I'm sure that's widely agreed to.)

In St. Louis, what did we do? I've been working on this for over 2 weeks...

Our Conference has made some slides available that we've edited, and I want to just go through these (albeit fairly quickly). Afterwards, we'll roll through the New Song questions we're received ahead of tonight. We have combined these questions into 4 categories and will be trying to hit different facets of these inquiries, but not all could possibly be answered in such a short timeframe.